



The trusty Time Lord Dr. Who comes and goes in various guises, but his popularity is as consistent as ever. Neil Heathcote looks at the history of one of television's most famous sci-fi heroes, and the Dr. Who videos available . . .

When Britain was first introduced to flying telephone boxes in 1963, no one knew quite how it would all end. *Doctor Who* could have disappeared from our screens as suddenly as he arrived. A fast fade, a grinding sound, and the phone box would be gone forever. But William Hartnell, the actor behind the crotchety old doctor, thought he knew better. "I remember telling her (Verity Lambert, his producer) 'This is going to last for five years' ". He was wrong.

Twenty years and several reincarnations later, *Dr Who* was as popular as ever. Adults watch it, children watch it, Americans imitate it and intellectuals study it. As the world's longest running regular sci-fi series, it's as much a British institution as the BBC that created it.

The year is 1963. BBC ratings are sagging somewhat with the rise of ITV.

New ideas are needed, and so an unexplained 'doctor' is thought up. An interplanetary day-tripper who travels in a spaceship that looks like a police phone box: all quite straightforward really. Of course, the BBC being what it was, the masses had to have their dose of culture. The doctor could appear anywhere in time or space. So in between alien invasions there came the battle of Culloden, the French Revolution and other golden moments from history.

Monsters

The order of the day was to avoid too many Bug-Eyed Monsters, with their anti-social habit of invading anywhere they could get their claws on. But the BBC soon had problems on its hands. After five episodes Dalek fever hit Britain and no one could get enough. Toy shops sold out of life-size replicas, while for the

discerning viewer there was Dalek soap and Dalek wallpaper. *Doctor Who* was here to stay.

Before long the critics had started up their eternal war-cry. The scripts were dull. The special effects were awful. The same laments have been heard ever since — until low-budget effects became a delight in themselves. Today's budget is 100 times the original £2000 per episode, and the cracks are still showing.

Audience ratings weren't as high as they might have been, and Hartnell was looking to bow out due to multiple sclerosis. The BBC decided to give things another whirl before closing down shop. Enter Patrick Troughton (the doctor, not being human, is allowed the occasional transformation like any other self-respecting Time Lord). Gone was the gruff old man. His successor was to be altogether more humorous, a poet and philosopher, with just a dash of the

Chaplinesque.

The Troughton years passed in a flurry of alien invasions, all of them collapsing just in the nick of time. It was a scriptwriter's dream come true: the only necessary ingredient was the doctor himself. Everything else was up for grabs. Of course there were the obligatory cliffhangers. As ever, the doctor scraped by with two seconds left to save the world, and lived to fight another day. *The Seeds of Death* is a good example, and available on video. Although in grainy black and white, with its 'This-could-mean-the-end-of-civilisation-as-we-know-it' plot, it keeps alive that buzz of excitement which made the series so popular at the time.

By 1970 Troughton was also set to move on. More to the point, the BBC felt that after seven years the British public deserved to know just what they had been watching all this time. All was revealed. The doctor is a 'Time Lord', who fled the tedium of his super-sophisticated home planet Galifree in search of intergalactic adventure. But now he was to be exiled on Earth for a while, in the guise of John Pertwee.

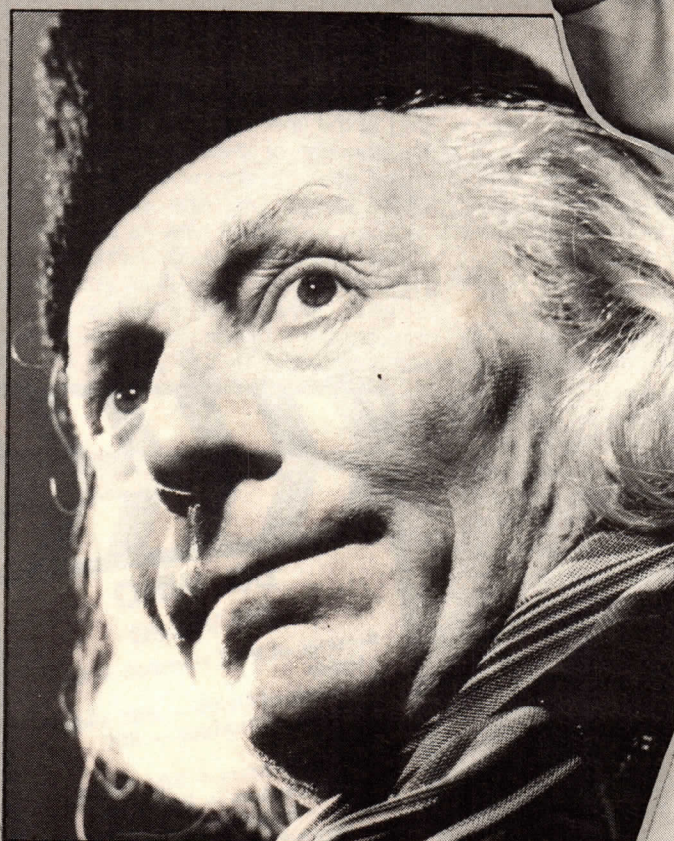
For the new, liberated 70s we were offered a rather more sophisticated hero, fully equipped with peroxide hair and velveteen jacket. Even the sidekicks caught up with the times. The pretty girls of the 60s who screamed long and loud and caused nothing but trouble were out of date. A more modern heroine was called for: Sarah Jane Smith, freelance journalist with her head well screwed on. Not that she didn't have her fair share of sticky situations. . .

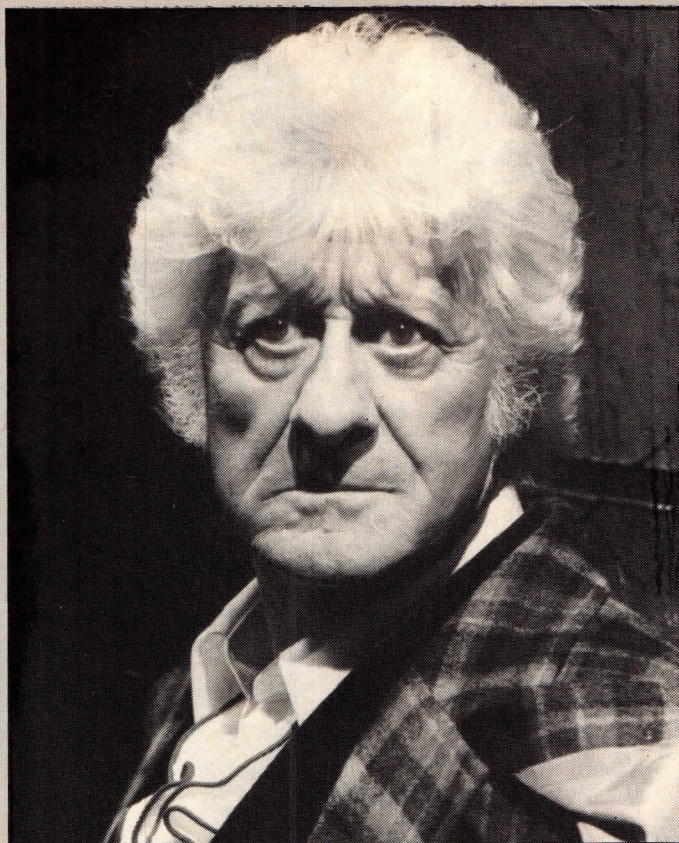
This was the age of gritty realism, in *Doctor Who's* inimitable sense of the term. Pertwee maintained that a Yeti was more scary 'on the toilet seat in Tooting Bec' than romping around the Himalayas. And so the style changed from interplanetary cruising to earth-bound action. James Bond type high-tech thrills and drama caught the mood of the moment. What with all this, and soldiers, and monsters, the series could hardly fail. But things could not stay the same forever.

They didn't have to. In 1975 Tom Baker arrived, and yet another new era was on the way. With his bulging eyes and ready supply of jelly babies he was like some bizarre rebel student. It was time to get back to the hard core sci-fi. "All you need is a strong, original idea. It doesn't have to be your own strong, original



Top: Tom Baker — rebellious eccentric
middle: Peter Davison a more Oxbridge sort of chap
Bottom left: William Hartnell — the original Dr. Who





Jon Pertwee

idea," proclaimed the new script editor Robert Holmes. With this, he ushered in a new wave of mock Gothic horror. Any cliché from 30s Hollywood to 60s Hammer films could be a source of inspiration for the new deliriously tongue-in-cheek stories. *The Brain of Morbius* reworks *Frankenstein* and throws in some occultism for good measure. *Pyramids of Mars* does things with Egyptian mummies that Boris Karloff never even dreamed of!

Mary Whitehouse was not amused. Nor were the Dutch, who ended up banning the series. All in all it was getting a bit too brutal and scary for a 'children's' programme. They might start getting the wrong ideas. Faced with a barrage of media concern, ratings were dropping and something had to be done. Back at the BBC the Gothic was purged. Comedy was the way to entice back the viewers.

"I may only be a middle-aged ten year-old, but I take *Doctor Who* very seriously," claimed Baker, but there were those who disagreed. Many devotees felt that the new producer Graham Williams wasn't taking things seriously enough. Even John Cleese made a cameo appearance as a ridiculous art critic. The first rule for the ever-changing production team is to treat *Doctor Who* with respect, and many thought a tradition was being broken. The success of *Star Wars* also provided lots of food for thought. No one had the money to compete. So it was back to basics and things that money can't buy — a good dose of drama backed up by well-written scripts.

By this time the new wave of conservative politics was in full swing, and

Peter Davison took over as an altogether more Oxbridge kind of chap. 'Young, heroic and vulnerable' was the idea. The old doctor had been too intelligent; finding convincing new problems for him to solve could be quite tricky. The new mood was for difficult characters, tighter drama and greater 'professionalism'.

Festival

With its 20th anniversary, the series was declared an institution in its own right. 150 or so *Doctor Who* paperbacks were joined by assorted highbrow studies and a brief festival at the National Film Theatre. Two *Doctor Who* films have been made: *Daleks — Invasion Earth 2150AD* and *Dr Who and the Daleks*. The series had taken off in America and could be seen in 54 countries. It was now the BBC's fourth largest earner in terms of sales and spin-offs. Despite all this, the BBC announced it was holding off production until 1986. Not long beforehand Colin Baker had taken over the doctor's role, freshly equipped with the most tasteless clothes the BBC wardrobe could assemble. But finance is finance, and the BBC protests that there isn't any. By way of compensation, several full stories have been released on video — which at least saves you the days or trauma waiting for the latest cliffhanger to be resolved. There's a splendid jaunt with the Cyberman. (*Revenge of the Cybermen*, with Tom Baker) or with the ice warriors (*The Seeds of Death*, with Patrick Troughton). Or you could try a couple



Colin Baker — the sixth Dr. Who

from the Gothic phase (*The Brain of Morbius*, *Pyramids of Mars*). Failing which *The Five Doctors* brings together everyone but Colin Baker in a last ditch attempt to save the universe. What more could you want for Christmas?

In 23 years, *Doctor Who* explored just about every direction you could imagine. All this, with scarcely a trace of sex and not too much violence (excluding evil aliens of course, who sooner or later get the splattering they deserve). Is this the end of the line? Probably not. The BBC has thought of shelving the doctor so many times, everyone has lost count. Quite simply, no one can think of anything to replace him. As an off-duty Dalek once remarked, "People are fascinated when they hear you are a Dalek... my two kids would be far less impressed if I'd been playing something like *King Lear* at the Old Vic..."

